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ABSTRACT

"Practical rhetoric" is a narrowing of classical rhetoric because it no longer shapes public opinion but is increasingly shaped by it, specifically by special interest groups formed around and geared to what a selected audience wants to hear. In the teaching of composition, this pluralism of rhetoric leads to fragmentation and specialization, and ultimately to a state of entropy, which in thermodynamics is the measure between heat and energy and the movement of both toward chaos or nothingness. English departments are moving toward nothingness because of their emphasis on literary studies. However, the trend is being in part reversed by new studies in rhetoric and composition. The danger is in the growing complexity of these studies and their fragmentation into specialized areas, including theory, practice, writing in two-year colleges, writing in four-year colleges, basic writing, technical writing, and computer writing, with specializations in each of these areas. One solution lies in having writing be the center of liberal studies and in moving it back to the public arena as a shaper of thought and the world. (CRH)

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Rhetorical Revival or Rhetorical Logomachy?

That we're living in an increasingly pluralistic society we're well aware. Each of us can offer illustrations. For myself, I've been collecting examples of how the word rhetoric is being modified. Of course, that for centuries rhetoric has been modified more than recognized as being the modifier is indeed familiar to us here. But we've come a long way from "mere" or "empty" rhetoric. The media have been narrowing the modification, for example, "official rhetoric" to "U.S. rhetoric" to "presidential rhetoric" to "Reagan rhetoric." And we see curious yokings like "spiritual rhetoric," "two-fisted rhetoric," "rococo rhetoric," "pro-family rhetoric," "sexually liberated rhetoric," and "cable-TV rhetoric." Recently, I read a newspaper editorial that mentioned "scatalogical rhetoric." Even more recently, I read in a magazine the term "fast-food rhetoric."

Most of these misplaced modifiers or displacement of rhetoric reflect dismissal of both the discourse and the speaker (no change here, of course). The urgency of our pluralistic society to split off and then erect boundaries around fragments of information shows no sign of lessening. All of us are urged to hurtle down the high tech highway leading to the facts that manufacture information and meta-information so fast that wisdom today seems narrowly portioned out by specialists who speak in indecipherable tongues. This explosion of new information is atomizing our culture toward the chaos of a modern-day Babel.

This slicing off pieces of our world is an example of what Michael Halloran calls practical rhetoric. We recognize the way it works, for instance, in special interest politics that have split off in response to a measured poll taking. These special interest groups are formed around and geared to what a selected audience wants to hear. This practical rhetoric is a narrowing of classical rhetoric because it no longer shapes public opinion but seems increasingly to be shaped by it.

How is this pluralism affecting our own profession? We're still having problems recognizing that there really is some continuity in the teaching of composition. In a recent article, Timothy Crusius argues that there is simply too much pluralism in rhetoric and composition:

"We are over our heads, inundated with 'isms.' Some of us are 'current traditionalists,' some Rogerians, Burkeans, Vygotskians, tagmemicists, Brittonites. . . . Some would call this lack of a center creative and healthy; if so, it

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is also chaotic and confusing. . . . The struggle to synthesize vanishes. Instead of working in a principled way to extend an existing paradigm as new insights turn up, the tendency is to wheel one's grocery cart through the warehouse of ideas and pitch in whatever happens to appeal at the time." (Freshman English News, Winter 1984, 1-2)

If it is as true in our own time as it has been in the past that rhetoric reflects culture, then maybe even exploring and questioning where we're going is foolish futility. Walter Ong has already told us "the history of rhetoric simply mirrors the evolution of society" (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1971, p. 9). If we agree with Ong that "rhetoric today has diffused itself in many forms" so that it no longer has the "neater contours" of less fragmented past cultures, is there any reason to believe that the fragmentation will decrease? Perhaps not, but I think we can at least explore what it might possibly mean for us in rhetoric and composition. To try to pull some parts together, I want to borrow and extend a metaphor Professor Daniel Marder has been working with. The metaphor of entropy, he has shown us already, can allow us "to pull parts into a vision of system and then to evaluate the vision's stability" ("High Entropy in the Profession," CEA Forum, Oct. 1982, 1-4).

In 1982 Professor Marder argued that the English profession is disintegrating because of its extreme systematization. Professor Marder advanced his argument by metaphorically using the law of entropy, that is, a measurement for loss of useful energy in any system. This metaphor has intrigued me, and, at the danger of oversimplifying and doing some injustice to Professor Marder's ideas, I'd like to explore the stability of rhetoric today--and its future.

Entropy, a principle of thermodynamics that measures the relationship between heat and energy, can be applied to any system. "Whether growing or decaying," Professor Marder explains, "systems tend to atomize themselves into states of increasing disorder until they reach an equilibrium we may call chaos or nothingness" (1). As I understand the metaphor, if an entity tries to systematize itself by an explosion of complex freshness, by bringing in more information than it can absorb in this rapid growth, then it atomizes into chaos. If an entity already has systematized itself through stale redundancies, it eventually falls toward nothingness. Either direction, according to the principle of entropy, leads to atomization, which is a fragmentation into unrecognizable parts. In the article Professor Marder says that English departments are inexorably moving toward nothingness because of their emphasis on literary studies. Remembering that either an explosion of complex freshness or a rigid system of stale

redundancies leads to atomization, we can better understand another principle: that movement toward atomization, either from too much complexity or from stagnation, is an example of positive entropy. Professor Marder explains that for a relatively short while the opposite force of negative entropy, a form of regeneration, can slow down or stop the too-fast growth toward chaos or the decay toward nothingness. Negative entropy slows down disintegration by regeneration, which would be energy working on new ideas in order to restructure. Professor Marder speculates that the new studies in rhetoric, working like negative entropy, are breathing new life into an English profession that has lost much of its useful energy through support of research that is too inwardly directed.

But we know that studies in rhetoric and composition have been moving in the opposite direction, away from a rigid system. Gary Tate has told us more than once that the "major intellectual challenge facing writing teachers today is not lack of knowledge but the problem of incorporating what we know into our teaching" (Rhetoric Review, 1 [Jan. 1983], 162). For twenty years we've been drawing from the whole spectrum of linguistic processes just as Richard Ohmann urged us to do in his seminal article "In Lieu of a New Rhetoric"; we've been exploring the whole field of motivational language in the Burkean way. And most of this work was done in the seventies although we know the seeds of revival and reform in rhetoric were sown back in the mid-fifties. Still, in 1973 it was necessary for Paul Bryant to chastise us at the 4C for much of this early work, for our meaningless repetition in "discovering the same things over and over" instead of using the principles we already had to strengthen our teaching. We've grown very rapidly since then (though there's the repetition still) and have gained some respect for our work, the least amount probably from specialists in literary studies. But by this rapid growth, rhetoric and composition may be exploding with so much complex freshness that we really may be heading toward chaos--some say we're already there. We may soon pass the point where we add new life to the profession and move on to the point where we destroy ourselves through fragmentation.

For instance, studies in composition have grown and become so complex that we have few general journals of writing left. They've split into theory, practice, writing in two-year colleges, writing in four-year colleges, basic writing, advanced composition, technical writing, computer writing. The journals specializing in theory or practice have split further into linguistic, psychological, philosophical issues. The specialized articles in the specialized journals are being written in specialized language that is intimidating enough to prevent more than a general understanding by many of us. (Some of these concerns Gary Tate was thinking of when he mentioned at last

year's NCTE what to him would be the ideal journal article: one written with the care of a Richard Young; one written with the wisdom of a Richard Lloyd-Jones; one written with the enthusiasm of an Ed Corbett; one written with the passion of a Bill Coles; and one with footnotes by a Jim Sledd.) Some journals seem to have begun a tendency, issue after issue, to feature quantitative analyses and studies. Involvement with audience, except for a very narrowly conceived one, is disappearing. It's becoming increasingly difficult to identify with the person speaking. It's becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with all these whirling fragments. So we become specialists too because we cannot keep up with all this knowledge, try as we might.

Each year our major conferences add more special interest sessions. Our 4Cs programs reflect the incredible number of special interests that often become standard sessions in following years. And as we reach farther and farther, we wrap the vocabulary of other fields around us. Do we have a center at all? If so, can we hold it? Is it not inconceivable that in the future, writing across the curriculum sessions or psychology sessions or computer sessions will become so numerous that they will splinter off into their own annual meetings? Programs already have to include a listing of sessions by subject matter so that, if we are inclined, we can more easily attend those sessions that address our own special fields. And for those of us who try to keep up with all the bewildering activity going on in rhetoric and composition, we find it more and more difficult to sample everything that the 4Cs offers. Perhaps it's not too difficult for us to imagine the 4Cs splitting into regional conferences because of all this energy. Just last year the University of Chicago held their conference on the relationship between writing and higher order reasoning at the same time the NCTE was meeting in Denver, forcing many of us to make a very difficult choice.

And the number of rhetoric and composition texts has increased so much in the last ten years that we find it difficult to go through any orderly textbook adoption procedure. Mike Rose in commenting upon this explosion first says, "textbooks are the repository of our knowledge on a given subject at a given time. . . . not so much knowledge of how to but knowledge of what is known or is currently surmised" (CCC, 34 [May 1983], 208-13). Then he asks if all this advice in composition texts is actually converted into practice. There's been no direct studies into what happens when students read composition textbooks. He further asks wouldn't we be "better served if the mad scramble for new textbooks and new authors was slowed down and true research and development took the place of the current marketing whirlwind?" Those English editors and publishers' representatives with whom I've discussed this publishing frenzy agree basically that the surge began five

years ago, but in the last three years it's gotten out of control. English editors in the college divisions of major publishers say that so many new titles are presented at these publishers' big annual meetings now that it is impossible to know all the listings well. No one wants general texts anymore--neither teachers nor publishers. Writing across the curriculum and basic writing texts have increased the most as more and more teachers who are specializing want focused texts. Last year, to give a representative example, one publishing firm had five new titles in composition; this year new titles jumped to sixteen.

Like Rose's plea for true research, the plea of Richard Young and John Hayes at last year's NCTE was for more empirical research, the "true" research that Mike Rose, I think, was speaking of, research based on our experience, based on what we already know, so that we may begin to solve some of the problems that have been set before ~~those of~~ us. And like the others I've mentioned here, Young and Hayes both said that we have enough substantive knowledge to last us for a while. Our rapid growth since the seventies has put us, theoretically at least, back in the center of English Studies. But we must guard against fragmenting ourselves further through specialization, or we'll never hold on to this center--or the nearness to it. We are on the spot, as Professor Young said, because now we have to solve the problems with literacy. Past amateurism is inconsistent with our new status. We must address our problems as serious scholars so that we will be taken seriously. The irony is that we must be on guard that we not, in the name of literacy crisis, save the traditional English Department at the risk of destroying ourselves.

Richard Lloyd-Jones agrees that empirical research in the last decade has been broader as it draws from the social sciences in comparison to the earlier research, where we seldom found two related studies by the same person. But even as he foresees that writing actually will come back to the center of liberal education, he also says that we've not done much to give others but "little sense of what might be learned from close instruction in writing" ("What We May Become," CCC, 23 [May 1982], 205). Those who've come close most recently, he says, although much of the instruction is narrowly transactional, are the teachers of letter and report writing, because they do deal with reasons.

I don't have any neat solutions ; I'm mainly trying to explore some issues I think are growing ever larger in rhetoric and composition. But it seems to me to make sense that in order to give good reasons for what we do it's time to move rhetoric back into the public arena, making it again a shaper of our world and moving away from practical rhetoric. Richard Lloyd-Jones also has told us "the real

justification for learning to write is not to serve the economy . . . but to master the self and the world" (205). Instead of further fragmenting ourselves and what we do, we can move toward the kind of empiricism that benefits our students now while helping shape the world that will be theirs. They can knowingly participate in studies that they have a real stake in. For instance, drawing from efforts of teachers of letter and report writing who have moved writing towards the public arena, we could give students a sense of mastering self and world by structuring courses concentrically around sequential assignments (or at least including such assignments) about writing. With all the renewed increased activity of local, state, and national committees on Johnny's declining language skills, our students could write about writing as they interviewed teachers and administrators in public schools and colleges, businesspeople, attorneys, manufacturers, technicians; as the students wrote letters, reports, proposals to these people and each other and about these people and each other. The subject matter of the discourse would be the same subject matter of the course. As for us, we'd begin to have some rich material as we began to do empirical research right alongside our students and these other people to give reason why learning to write lets us master both self and world. And we'd be closer to forming concentric circles, not separate worlds. Perhaps we would not get caught in an either/or situation: either bursting into fragments from too much expansion or dying from stagnation.

If, as Professor Marder suggests, the new studies in rhetoric are acting as negative entropy, that is, are slowing down the profession's disintegration, then our growth certainly has been beneficial. But in helping to save the profession--what's left of it after speech, journalism, and linguistics already have split off--from staleness, we need not save literary studies at our own expense, at our own disintegration through a too rapid growth to take up their slack. I'm not suggesting that we must extend one existing paradigm (although Professor Crusius in his recent article and in a forthcoming one argues convincingly for extension and interpretation of Kinneavy's ideas) or that we reduce all our knowledge to one theory or to one set of practices. We don't have to be reductionist. Anyway, don't we have, basically, one inclusive body of knowledge? Professor Ed Corbett has told us and showed us that "nearly all our studies in composition" represent variation, extensions, refinements, or modifications of classical theory ("My Work in Rhetoric," fforum: Essays on Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing, Boynton/Cook, 1983, p. 290). Along with empirical research there's a need for more historical research in composition. Frank D'Angelo says in a recent CCC article that to delve deeper into this rich history would help us examine our assumptions about what we know and where we're

heading. So much that we now think is new we might have a different perspective if all these changes going on were examined from a historical perspective.

I remember in graduate school those of us studying rhetoric thought--until we learned better--that the approaches of two well-respected professors in rhetoric neatly illustrated an either/or philosophy. We'd listen to one highly admired professor as he, in his characteristically rambling way, instilled in us the inclusiveness of rhetoric. We'd listen to another, equally admired in our profession, as he, in his charcteristically economical way, rhetorically asked us what the profession is gaining in its excruciating attempt to pull everything into rhetoric. Until we got smarter, we thought the two philosophies were so different that we in our graduate student smart-aleckness, referred to one as "RH=Life" and the other as "RH=Restraint." Later we realized that these two views could be concentric circles, not separate worlds.

We can grow in thoughtful stages. We can begin to solve some of the problems we've been given to solve. We can be inclusive while at the same time selecting carefully. We can give reason to the electorate in our departments and schools and the world that writing should be the center of liberal studies. And by controlling our growth, we can ensure ourselves a longer place in the center, our center will hold longer, and we can better hold off the force that might be too soon leading us to be residents of and participants in that old and familiar Babel, that rhetorical babel about logomachy.